

There once was this 90-pound weakling with scars on top of his scars. Liver transplant, kidney transplant, strokes, brain surgery -- you name it, he'd been in the O.R. for it. He always told people he was a jock underneath it all, but at 5-foot-2 with no discernible muscle, nobody ever took him seriously. In his dreams, he was a firefighter, a ladies' man, a halfback, an Adonis. But those dreams couldn't possibly come true, not when he was stiff-legged, the butt of jokes. Odds were that he'd never see the world, that he'd end up right where he started: as a wisp of a man in a mile-long southeast Kansas town.

Chevi Peters tried all his life not to succumb to the hopelessness. Along with bagging ice at the local convenience store, that was his job -- to laugh everything off, to hang in, hang in, hang in. In other words, he had to flip the switch. Even if he felt weak because of his 38 operations or inadequate because of his crooked teeth or melancholy because of his parents' divorce, he decided he could never show it. Flipping the switch meant smiling when he felt lonely or people-pleasing when he felt ostracized. He pulled this off for 20-something years -- a minor miracle -- until, one August night in 2008, he climbed into his car and decided to drive it into oncoming traffic.



Special Olympics World Games: Chevi Peters

We feature Chevi Peters, a powerlifter from Pittsburg, Kansas, who has overcome countless surgeries and a kidney transplant to prepare for the Special Olympics World Games.

THERE ONCE WAS this 300-pound mental health worker who refused to leave his apartment. What a waste of talent. Years before, John Lair had attended his first Special Olympics track meet and found his calling. He was a gentle giant, a former high school nose tackle the children with disabilities instantly flocked to. He was this bear of a man with a surprisingly soothing voice. He would listen to their stories, would be quick with a hug. He knew right away he was perfect for the job of coach.

He shared his hopes and dreams with his best and oldest friend, Chad Oehme, whom he had spoken with every day since kindergarten. Lair told Oehme he wanted to help Special Olympics athletes feel part of the community, and Oehme told Lair he wanted to be a big-city policeman. They were inseparable. They were in their 20s. Their whole lives were ahead of them -- until, in September 2000, Oehme collapsed and died of a heart attack.

Doctors couldn't tell Lair why his friend was dead. Autopsies were inconclusive. Lair went into a tailspin, took a leave of absence from his job at an adult care home. He pulled the shades on his apartment windows and rarely ventured outside. He diagnosed himself with depression. "Loneliest I've ever felt in my life," he says. He wasn't thinking of hurting himself, but he needed a pick-me-up, a change.

He fortuitously landed a job at New Hope Services, a support center for people with intellectual disabilities in his hometown of Pittsburg, Kansas. The director asked him to start a Special Olympics program from scratch -- right up his alley. His dream was coming true, yet he still felt a void in his life. Something was missing -- until, one August night in 2008, he climbed into his car to stop Chevi Peters from killing himself.

PETERS HAD swerved off the main road and pulled his car into Lakeside Park in central Pittsburg. His head was in a fog. He found a park bench and was alternately mumbling, shouting and weeping out loud. A police officer named Chris Moore happened to drive by and notice the breakdown. He asked what was going on, and Peters just let it all flow out:

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I've just been battling, and I don't know if I can battle anymore.

I don't feel like being alive.

I am not worth a darn thing.

Moore noticed Peters' shirt, which said, New Hope Bulldogs. The officer knew all about New Hope Special Olympics. About a year earlier, he had become friends with Lair at a fundraising event for the facility. They had worked on a torch run project together. So Moore asked Peters whether he knew John Lair. "Yeah, I do," Peters answered. "That's my coach."

Lair wasn't really Peters' coach, at least not yet. He had been introduced to Peters only a month before, although Lair had been hearing about him for almost a decade. Lair and Peters' mother, a nurse named Donna McElroy, had worked together closely at his previous job, and McElroy would always tell Lair, "I've got this young guy that's going to be great for your teams someday."

Eventually, in June 2008, that day had come. McElroy had sensed that Peters was especially dour and needed a fresh start in his life. She asked her son whether he was ready to be a Special Olympics athlete and marched him straight into Lair's office. The sight of 24-year-old Peters jarred Big John. "He was real wiry, really small," he says. Peters also spoke glaringly slow. His IQ was just under 70. But Peters flipped his switch, grinned and said, "I want to be part of the team."

Lair went on to list the Special Olympics sports that day, to see what piqued Peters' interest. There was Alpine skiing, track and field, basketball, bocce, bowling, flag football, golf, snowshoeing, soccer, softball, volleyball, tennis and powerlifting."

"Powerlifting?" said Chevi, his eyes bulging. "I want to be a powerlifter."

Of all the sports, that was the one Lair least expected Peters to pick. Something was unique about this kid, Lair thought. "It's going to take some work," he told Peters. But they shook hands on it and agreed to start training soon -- and that was it until Lair got a phone call from Officer Moore that August night in 2008.

"Get here now," Moore told Lair.

While Lair was racing to the park at 80 mph, it occurred to him that this was going to be bigger than any power lift. This was Peters getting the weight of the world off his shoulders.

From top: Peters hugs coach John Lair after practice; Peters trains at New Hope Services in May; Peters jokes with a friend at New Hope. Preston Gannaway for ESPN

THEY ENDED up together on the park bench -- Peters and Lair -- sobbing in each other's arms. Lair wasn't sure yet why Peters was crying, and Peters wasn't clear yet why Lair was crying. Their embrace lasted a good 15 minutes, until Lair finally got Peters to calm down and explain. His whole life, Peters had just wanted to be normal. He was born with biliary atresia, and his parents were told by doctors that he would probably die of liver cirrhosis at the age of 1. To be eligible for a liver transplant, he had to live to 2 and reach 15 pounds -- and he only barely made it. He had his first stroke at age 5 and his second stroke at age 9, that one putting him in a coma for 16 days. His brain operation came next. The whole ordeal left him with a neurological deficit.

He just wanted to be like his brother, Jarrett, who was a three-sport letterman in their hometown of St. Paul, Kansas (approximate population: 633). Football was Peters' favorite, but the closest he got to the field was as the team water boy. He treasured running into the huddle during timeouts with his water bucket, wearing jersey No. 39. He would fire up the crowd from the sideline. Up until then, he'd been bullied at school for being what he calls special ed. But being water boy meant the jocks had his back. They awarded him a letterman's jacket. After that, no one dared mess with Peters.

“

Chevi was the worst case. We've had people that say they want to quit their job. But never wanting to take their life.”

- Coach John Lair

After graduation, his wish came true to be a volunteer firefighter, although one time he inadvertently drove his car through the front door of the firehouse. He was clumsy that way; it was the charm of Peters. But the other firefighters had his back, too. He was again one of the boys -- until the day in 2006 when his kidney gave out.

He needed a donor for a transplant, and it turned out his jock brother was a perfect match. As soon as he received Jarrett's kidney, Chevi's confidence rose. "I had my brother's power inside me," he says. He even had his first girlfriend. He was finally a ladies' man. He almost felt normal. But, over time, the relationship with his lady friend spiraled, and on that August day in 2008, she dumped Chevi for one of his best friends.

That's the story he explained to Lair on the park bench. He told his coach he had never felt more alone. His parents were estranged, and his brother had a wife and a child. He had nowhere to go. He told Lair that he wanted to "end it all," that he had nothing to look forward to, that he'd never be normal, that he just needed someone who cared. Lair was floored because, in his brief dealings with Peters, he'd never seen him have a bad day. But studies show that 20 to 42 percent of youths with intellectual disabilities have suicidal thoughts or behavior, and Lair himself had previously witnessed depression among some of the kids at New Hope.

"Just because they're bullied, made fun of, felt to feel less than," he says. "We deal with it from time to time. But Chevi, by far, was the worst case. We've had people that say they want to quit their job. Different stuff like that. But never wanting to take their life." On the bench that night, Lair was afraid that if he left Peters unsupervised, he'd never see him again -- which is why he had flashbacks of his old friend, Chad Oehme. It's why he, too, openly wept at Lakeside Park.

"Chevi felt [depressed] like I did earlier," Lair says. "The first thing I thought of was my friend who was gone, and I did not want to lose Chevi because we'd gotten close in a short time. I just had this overall feeling that I've got to do something for him -- somehow, some way -- because, if not, he's going to be lost."

So Peters -- after being cleared by the police -- went to live with his coach.



Peters trains with coach John Lair at New Hope Services in May. Preston Gannaway for ESPN

LAIR AND PETERS became attached at the hip. They shared a room at one of New Hope's residential homes in Pittsburg, and Lair shadowed him at breakfast, lunch, dinner, midnight snack. Peters' mother stopped by to see them, and a more lucid Peters apologized to her, telling her it'd never happen again. "I'm with my coach now -- my life," he said to her.

A week later, Lair introduced Peters to his first barbell. A deal was a deal. Peters had asked to be a powerlifter, and Lair knew Peters was searching for something, anything to live for.

Peters told Lair his goal was to deadlift 300 pounds. Lair liked his enthusiasm but asked him to settle for a goal of 150 instead. His mother had been skeptical of it all -- "Can little guys powerlift?" she asked -- but Peters told Lair that he'd seen people on TV win championships and that he wanted to be one of those people with a medal around his neck. That, he said, would make him more than normal.

Lair spent five minutes demonstrating the proper deadlift technique, and, on his first attempt, Peters -- following Lair's instructions to the letter -- lifted 95 pounds. "I really thought it was impressive," Lair says, "because he only weighed 90 pounds. He lifted more than his body weight. I thought, 'Wow, we can work with this.'"

The next step was getting Peters to weigh more than 100 pounds. He had little to no core strength. So he began a training regimen that reminded him of his brother's weight-room routine in high school. That was the best part of it. Peters was a jock now. He'd work out his shoulders, chest and back. He'd do kettle-bell work, wide-grip bench press, grip bench press and curls. Now someone was bringing him water. It was the football training camp he'd never been allowed to do in high school. He loved the sweat. He'd slap on a purple Under Armour headband and obey every word out of Big John's mouth.

"It really put a smile on my face and put a smile on John's face," Peters says. "I was pretty stoked that I could maybe go farther in life as a powerlifter."



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- Chevi Peters

Peters wasn't transformed overnight. He still periodically required blood work to monitor his kidneys and liver. He needed power naps. But after about 14 months of cardio and weight training, Peters finally reached his goal of deadlifting 150 pounds. It happened in 2010 in New Hope's tiny dungeon of a weight room, and, according to Lair, Peters "made the lift, looked up at me and by my surprise, jumped right into my arms."

Next came the Special Olympics medals -- floods of them. At first, he won some bronzes and occasional silvers. He was methodically hitting his newest goals of 175 pounds and 200 pounds, and Lair remembers thinking, "How high will it go?"

Peters was living in his own apartment with a roommate by then because Lair trusted he was no longer a threat to himself. He had emerged as almost the quasi-mayor of New Hope, greeting everyone with a smile and a sappy compliment. In fact, it was almost Lair's preference to make him grittier.

In 2011, before the Kansas Special Olympics state competition, Lair decided Peters' new nickname would have to be: Manimal.

"What do you mean?" Peters asked when given the moniker.

"You're half-man, half-animal," Lair answered.

"I am?" Peters asked.

"Yes. When you lift, I want you to turn that switch on," Lair said.

Flipping the switch was right up Peters' alley. He swept all of the powerlifting gold medals in his weight division at that 2011 state competition. He would turn his Manimal switch on, growl, bug his eyes and deadlift the 225 pounds. He would jump into the arms of Lair, who would say, "OK, now turn the switch off." Then he'd be mild-mannered Peters all over again.

"I wasn't expecting to win it, but with the Manimal, I got it," Peters says. "I just tune out every noise and somehow I go into tunnel vision, I guess you can say. That's where my power comes from -- from the Manimal."

The two of them began traveling the country for Special Olympics events. A 100-pound man would win gold, then bear-hug his 300-pound coach -- and there wouldn't be a dry eye in the house. In New Orleans, they strolled the French Quarter. In St. Louis, they took in a Cardinals baseball game. You would never see one without the other.

Peters' dead lifts increased incrementally to 250, 285 and then an even 300 in 2013. "Before the 300-pound lift, [Chevi] told me, 'I don't know if I can do this,'" Lair says. "'Turn the switch on' is what I told him. And he pulled the 300 pounds up, locked it and stood there in place. The look on his face was something I'll never forget."

By 2014, Peters was able to deadlift 325, nearing Jarrett's career-best lift of 340. He was on his way to being the strongest man in his family, at all of 5-2.

"Actually, I'm 5-foot-3," Peters says.

"Yeah, with your shoes on," Lair says.

"Come on, Coach," Peters says.

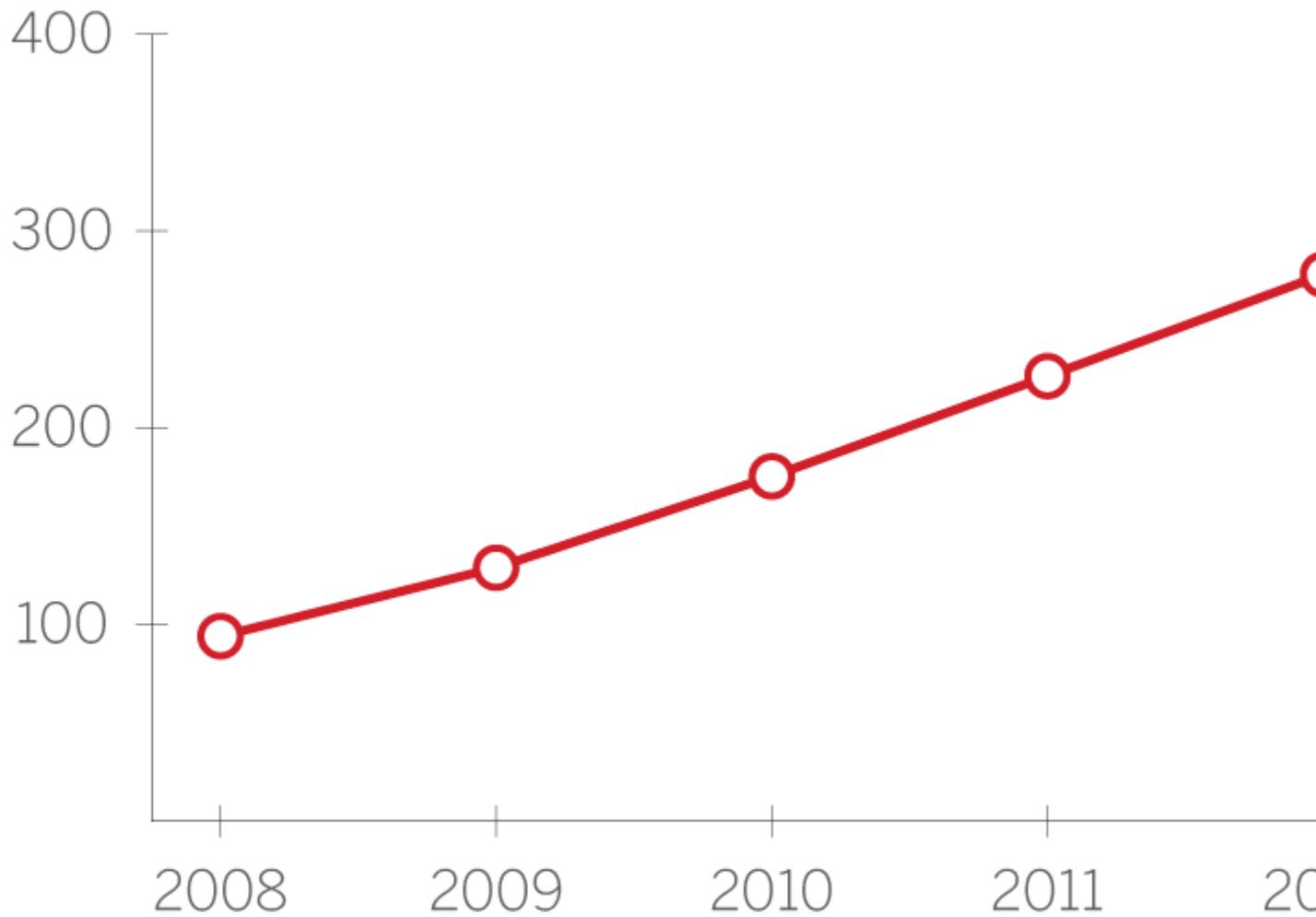
Their next extended trip together, in 2014, was the Special Olympics USA Games in New Jersey. His mom drove east to be ringside and held up a "Manimal" sign from her seat. Before Peters' lift, Lair told him, "Show everybody what Kansas boys are all about." Peters then flipped the switch and nabbed the gold medal. He was a national champion; he was more than normal.

"Chevi's making up for lost time," Lair says.

Back home in Kansas, Peters' photo was soon plastered all over highway billboards, along with the inscription: "Be A Fan of Respect." He had his own baseball card. His all-sports medal count was approaching 600. He couldn't walk the streets without being eyeballed. His beaming parents started to be more civil to each other. He even had himself a new girlfriend, a Special Olympics athlete from up near Kansas City.

At the age of 31, life was worth living. He weighed 121 pounds and had almost zero body fat. His best dead lift was now 350 pounds (for perspective, NBA MVP Steph Curry deadlifts 400); his best bench press was 160 pounds; and his best squat was 275 pounds. He was invited to represent the U.S. in the Special Olympics World Games this summer in Los Angeles (July 25-Aug. 2) -- giving him a chance to lift against the best from Canada and Greece. Peters was really going to get to see the world. His Facebook page became inundated with kudos. Even the quarterback from his old high school -- a guy he used to bring water to -- messaged Peters to say: "Kick butt."

CHEVI PETERS' DEADLIFT PERSONAL BESTS BY YEAR



"Most common guys get to their late 20s, early 30s, it's time to slow down and maybe get fat, get bald, kind of settle down with a family," Jarrett says. "You just don't jump out of bed when you're 30 years old and say, 'I'm going to become a World Games powerlifter.' It just doesn't happen."

Peters didn't have scars on top of his scars anymore; he had muscles on top of his muscles. At the World Games, he announced his presence by winning three gold medals and a silver -- having traded in his purple New Hope tank top for one that read "USA."

He and Lair had done it together. Peters keeps saying Lair saved him -- "I wouldn't trade anything in the world for my best friend," Peters says -- but Lair knows full well it was Peters who rescued him. It was Peters who filled the void in Lair's life after Oehme's death. It was Peters who made sure Lair's talents didn't get wasted. It was Peters who helped Lair get the exposure he needed to become 2014 Special Olympics North America Coach of the Year.

"Chevi remotivated me," Lair says. "There is never any give up in Chevi, which I love. He thanks me probably three or five times a day every trip we go on: 'Thanks for taking me, thanks for being part of my life.' As a coach, you're like, 'You're doing something right here.'"

The weight of the world has been powerlifted off of them now. At the end of May every year, Lair and Peters go back to Lakeside Park for a Special Olympics fishing tournament in Chad Oehme's memory, and, inevitably, they bring up that August night in 2008. They go find the park bench. They sit down. There is usually a long pause. Then Peters always tells Lair the same thing: "This is a good place. I found myself here."

"Me, too," Big John always answers him. "Me, too."

ESPN feature producer Miriam Greenfield contributed to this story.



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